

# THE POWER OF BIOGRAPHY: SHIFTING THE BOUNDARIES OF KNOWLEDGE THROUGH EMANCIPATORY PEDAGOGY AND CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper<sup>1</sup> I describe the application of the experiential and emancipatory strategies of Gramsci (1971, 1977, 1988), Freire (1970, 1972, 1973) and Giroux (1983, 1994, 1997) in an attempt to shift the boundaries of knowledge and to develop critical consciousness among students using the author's work with international students as an example. Sewpaul (2004a; 2004b) described creative teaching/learning strategies and the use of discourse ethics in the development of citizenship education with local students. The main argument in this paper is that critical reflection on one's social and political realities and the capacity to develop action strategies consequent upon these reflections constitute central elements in shifting the boundaries of knowledge. Both local and international student populations need to be viewed as "client" groups insofar as we recognise that they enter the classroom and the field-training context with varying degrees of disadvantage. One of these disadvantages is the control of consciousness by means of state machinery and ideology (Gramsci, 1977) in an attempt to maintain capitalist and ruling-class hegemony, which is a feature of both Western and non-Western societies.

On a universal level, the impact of oppression is such that oppressed people eventually turn societal and political oppression into self-oppression. Students need opportunities to engage in processes in which identities and dominant social and political ideologies can be deconstructed. Of equal importance is the aim of providing students with a framework of options for the reconstruction of their identities by identifying external sources of exclusion and oppression (and of privilege), engaging in re-scripting or re-authoring of the self, and the building of action upon their strengthened identities.

Action, reflection, deconstruction and reconstruction, which are central to empowerment-based practice, constitute the basis for shifting the boundaries of knowledge and for the development of critical consciousness. Students need to be engaged in such processes, if they are to engage successfully with "client" populations in similar ways. Moreover, if educators accept that education "...is a constitutive process of constructing meaning and critically interrogating the forces that shape lived experiences" (Giroux, 1983:155), they will accept that educators need to identify how their own ideology informs their teaching content and methodologies. These assertions are also born out of my personal biography, which I describe below.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was published under the title "Reframing epistemologies and practice through international exchanges: Global and local discourses in the development of critical consciousness". In: DOMINELLI, L.D. & BERNARD, W.T. (eds) 2003. **Broadening horizons: International exchanges in social work**. Aldershot: Ashgate. In view of the specific exit-level outcomes regarding the development of critical consciousness, which is frequently misunderstood, prescribed by the national Social Work Standards Generation Body as per the National Qualifications Framework requirements of the South African Qualifications Authority, I requested and was granted permission by the publisher to have this paper published in a national South African journal so that it becomes more readily accessible for a South African readership.

## THE POWER OF BIOGRAPHY

Gramsci (1977) saw the starting point of critical elaboration to be the positioning of oneself as a product of the historical process. In a similar vein, Giroux argued that an examination of the historical and social constructs of our lives "...helps to reterritorialize and rewrite the complex narratives that make up [our] lives" (Giroux, 1997:159). Critical and emancipatory pedagogy raises important issues regarding the way we construct our identities within particular historical, cultural and social relations, with the intention of contributing to a more democratic life. My personal biography confirms that emancipatory pedagogy begins with everyday life experiences and with the particular as the basis of learning, deconstruction and action. For bell hooks (1989), a feminist writer, one's voice should be the object of theoretical and critical analysis so that it can be connected to broader notions of solidarity, struggle and politics. Apart from the personal-political identity links, the power of biography lies in its potential to reflect how power and/or powerlessness are reproduced in everyday life experiences. I experienced my most formative years as a child, adolescent and young adult in apartheid South Africa. Such was the power of the internalised oppression of my mother that I grew up in a family setting where the status quo was completely accepted. Here we were made to believe that whites were demigods, to be respected and revered as such. My mother knew no better. "Subjectivities are produced within those social forms in which people move but of which they are often only *partially* conscious" (Giroux, 1997:158, my emphasis). Widowed at a very young age, with me, the youngest of seven children being five months old at the time of my father's death, my mother worked as a domestic servant for whites for almost forty years. Hence her sense of gratitude for whites having provided her with a livelihood, or perhaps it was a reflection of Fanon's (1970) thesis of loving the oppressor.

Our subservience to whites was understandable, as the only relationship that we shared with them was one of "master" and "servant". Group areas and separate amenities legislation ensured that we did not get to know whites in any other capacity, let alone as equals. Such was my mother's indoctrination that, while walking on the streets where whites lived, we were shushed into silence as children because "whites don't like noise". Under such circumstances my capacity to externalise and to understand the sources of oppression and of my diminished sense of self (which was quite acute!) were clearly limited. At the height of apartheid there were innumerable laws such as the Separate Amenities Act, the Group Areas Act and the Immorality Act that were designed to inform people of colour that we were inferior. On reading signs that said "Whites Only" or "Right of Admission Reserved", I did not see the problem as an aspect of an oppressive state, but rather I owned the problem and believed that something must have been wrong with me. Yet I believe that I was more fortunate than most people of colour in South Africa. My experience would serve to confirm Giroux's claim that the "...mechanisms of domination and the possible seeds of liberation reach into the very structure of the human psyche" (Giroux, 1983:39).

In South Africa the discovery of Freire's (1970, 1972, 1973) method of conscientisation through liberating dialogue and praxis came at just the right moment - during the 1970s when I was in secondary school. At this time Freire's works, which were banned by the government, found their way into South African black universities and into the South African Student Organisation (SASO). His work, particularly the *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, had a profound impact on young activists of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and contributed to the radicalisation and politicisation of education (Alexander, 1989). As a secondary school learner, I was fortunate to have had the guidance of black consciousness activists such as the late Steve Biko, Strini Moodley and his wife Sam Moodley, who entered our school as a young enthusiastic teacher bent on politicising us. Sam would get us engaged in fantasy trips, free writing and drama, replicating in the classroom the forces of apartheid and oppression. On picking up self-blame and messages of internalised oppression that were characteristic of so many of us, she would confront us with the

realities and made us see that the real enemy was the apartheid state. Consciousness-raising strategies were coupled with further action in which as school learners we formed, with the help of the BCM leaders, a theatre group called the Chatsworth Arts and Theatre Organisation (CATO). Through CATO we undertook community political education, wrote *Animal farm* into a drama script and produced this as a play. These activities did not come without their own difficulties. Within weeks of CATO's formation we had the Security Branch on us, with threats of suspension from school if we continued our political activities.

Apart from its intrinsic value in helping us recognise our own worth, the activities allowed us to gain a certain measure of control over our lives and over an unrelenting, oppressive system. This control in turn provided us with a sense of hope for change, an element emphasised by Giroux (1997) in *Pedagogy and the politics of hope: Theory, culture and schooling*. This hope was born out of some community initiatives, for example, successfully but non-violently resisting the authorities when they planned to terminate a vital bus transportation facility that would have severely jeopardised the livelihood of the working-class people in the area that we lived in. It is perhaps this kind of hope, and the vision of possible change among the generation of school and university learners, that culminated in the well-known 1976 Soweto Riots, where the slogan *Liberation before education* became popularised. In 1976, as a first-year university student in an ethnic institution that fully supported the apartheid status quo, we truly believed as we chanted that "we shall overcome someday... black man [sic] shall be free someday". The BCM, which was banned in 1977 provided an invaluable source of support, encouragement and guidance as we organised student boycotts and rallies. It is this background that informs my educational philosophy. Through these experiences and people such as Steve Biko, Strini and Sam Moodley, I realised that I was not a "...passive [victim] of society's control elements" (Coetzee, 2001:137), and that I had the capacity to reflect and act upon these elements. This realisation informs my interactions and desired objectives with local and international students, thus supporting the insights of bell hooks (1989), who she argues that the value of the narrative lies in theorising experiences as part of a broader politics of engagement. I explore this in greater detail below.

## **ON FREIRE, GRAMSCI AND GIROUX: CRITICAL AND EMANCIPATORY PEDAGOGY**

Having *trained* in an ethnically based "Indian" apartheid institution that was preoccupied with the reproduction of the dominant cultural and political ideology, with the majority of staff being white, I was certainly not introduced to any form of critical *education* during this period. As a secondary school learner, the benefits derived from critical consciousness and action, which allowed us to "...mobilize rather than destroy [our] hopes for the future" (Giroux, 1997:161), initially led me to the work of Freire (1970, 1972, 1973) and later to the emancipatory pedagogies of Gramsci (1988, 1971, 1977) and Giroux (1983, 1994, 1997).

With reference to the central theses of Gramsci (1988, 1971, 1977) and Freire (1970, 1972, 1973), Giroux (1983) contended that the spirit of critical or radical pedagogy is "...rooted in aversion to all forms of domination, and its challenge centres around the need to develop modes of critique fashioned in a theoretical discourse that mediates the possibility for social action and emancipatory transformation" (Giroux, 1983:2). Critical theorists believe in the dialectic of agency and structure, and developed theoretical perspectives that support the notion that history can be changed and provide potential for radical transformation. Giroux (1983, 1994, 1997), Gramsci (1971, 1977) and Freire (1970, 1972, 1973) addressed educational issues as political and cultural issues.

## PAULO FREIRE

Writing in relation to the Brazilian people, Freire contended that “They could be helped to learn democracy through the exercise of democracy; for that knowledge, above all others, can only be assimilated experientially” (1973:36). Given the transition of Brazil from a closed to an open society at the time, Freire said in *Education for critical consciousness*:

*“I was concerned to take advantage of that climate to attempt to rid our education of its wordiness, its lack of faith in the student and his [sic] power to discuss, to work, to create. Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in men [sic], on the belief that they not only can but should discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself. Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion” (1973:36).*

The value of Freire’s work lies in his linking *micro-educational* methodologies to theories of *social change*. This understanding, combined with his emphasis on the integrative processes of action, critical reflection, theoretical knowledge and participatory democracy, support the contention that the micro-macro dichotomy is a fallacious one. While the underlying assumption of Freire’s work is that critical understanding would lead to critical action, there is the possibility that his emphasis on egalitarian educator-learner relationships, and action and reflection, could become ends in themselves. However, as elucidated in my biography, Freire’s work had a profound impact on educational and political epistemologies in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. His writings provided the philosophical and methodological foundations for the positive engagement of students and of wider citizenship groups in the processes toward the struggle for democracy. These insights are invaluable when working with both international and local students.

## ANTONIO GRAMSCI

Similar to the thesis of Freire (1972, 1973), Gramsci (1977) argued that education should be used for the creation of a vision of the future through its daily practice, and that knowledge consists of theory and existential experience which is located historically within its context, and is based on action and reflection. Gramsci (1971, 1977) used the concept of *hegemony* as a central explanation of the functioning of the capitalist system, and elucidated the role of ideology and the state in the reproduction of class relations and in preventing the development of working-class consciousness. Gramsci went beyond Marxist economic determinism by expounding the ways in which common sense and identities are formed within their historical and social locations.

Central to Gramsci’s work is what he called *common sense* (also *contradictory consciousness*) and *good sense*. Gramsci claimed that “...all men [sic] are ‘philosophers’” (1971:323), with their philosophy contained in: (a) language, (b) “common sense” and “good sense”, and (c) the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions and ways of seeing things and acting, which are collectively referred to as “folklore”. However, he contended that common sense functioned without benefit of critical interrogation. Common sense consists of the incoherent set of generally held assumptions and beliefs common to any given society, while good sense means practical, empirical common sense, thus the need to transform common sense into good sense. Contradictory consciousness or common sense is characterised by a dual conception of the world: “...one affirmed in words and the other displayed in effective

action” (Gramsci, 1971:326). Thus, ideology is located not only at the level of language but also in lived experience. Gramsci saw the contrast between thought and action to be an expression of profounder contrasts of a socio-historical order. While social groups have their own conceptions of the world, such groups “...for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination” (Gramsci, 1971:237) have also adopted a conception which is not its own. In ordinary times, when such groups are not acting autonomously, it is the conception of the dominant group that prevails.

For Gramsci (1971) the contradictory state of consciousness, characterised by innocuous ideologies, did not provide for choice and action, but for “moral and political passivity” (1971:333). Thus, in his *Prison letters* Gramsci wrote, “The outbreak of the World War has shown how ably the ruling classes and groups know how to exploit these apparently innocuous ideologies in order to set in motion the waves of public opinion” (1988:171). However, as Giroux pointed out, contradictory consciousness does not only point to domination and confusion, but also to “...a sphere of contradictions and tensions that is pregnant with possibilities for radical change” (1983:152).

Gramsci (1971) argued that innovation could not come from the masses, at least not at the beginning, except through mediation of the “elite” or the “intellectual”. The role of ideology becomes critical to the extent that it has the potential to reveal truths by deconstructing historically conditioned social forces, or it could reinforce the concealing function of common sense. It is thus vital that common sense be subject to critical interrogation. In Gramsci’s words: “Critical understanding of self takes place ... through a struggle of political ‘hegemonies’ and of opposing directions...Consciousness of being part of a particular hegemonic force (that is political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness” (1971:333). Thus, the theory-practice nexus that arises with ideological critique and critical understanding is not merely a mechanical fact; it reflects the need for a historical consciousness. Historical consciousness, as a moment of ideological critique, functions “...to perceive the past in a way that [makes] the present visible as a revolutionary moment” (Buck-Morss cited in Giroux, 1997:84). Political revolutionary action for Gramsci (1971) could take the forms of war - a war of movement, a war of position and underground warfare. The war of position would constitute the passive revolution that takes place in societies characterised by relative stability.

## **HENRY GIROUX**

Giroux, a contemporary American writer, embraces the central theses of Freire (1970, 1972, 1973) and Gramsci (1988, 1971, 1977) regarding politics, culture, class, education, critical consciousness and critical action, but he adds to his radical pedagogy significant issues of “race”, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, multiculturalism, citizenship education and identity politics. Given social work’s current preoccupation with multiculturalism, Giroux’s views are worth mentioning. In what he called an insurgent multiculturalism, Giroux (1994, 1997) called for discourses on multiculturalism which have been used to victimise minority groups, with an emphasis on their deficits and one which presents them as the “other”, to be combined with discourses on power, racialised identities and class. In doing so, we need to move away from using white, which is a mark of racial and gender privilege, as a point of departure in identifying difference. Whiteness, as a “race” and colour, represents itself as an archetype for being *civilized* and *good*, and in so doing represents the *Other* as *primitive* and *bad*. This is characterised by the textured use of *colour* in the English language as a signifier for such archetypes. Thus all that is bad has become associated with black, such as black book, black sheep, blacklisted and blackmail. Would a deconstruction of “race” from the constraints of such representations mean a deconstruction of the very language

that reproduces it; a language that has become embedded in the psyches of people to become, in Gramsci's terms, the common sense?

Citing James Baldwin, Giroux claims that "...differences in power and privilege authorize who speaks, how fully, under what conditions, against what issues, for whom, and with what degree of consistent, institutionalized support" (1997:236). Critical multiculturalism must examine how racism in its various forms gets reproduced historically and institutionally, and essentialist views regarding black, female or African must be rejected. While multiculturalism generally focuses on the *other*, Giroux calls for a multiculturalism that provides "...*dominant groups* with the knowledge and histories to examine, acknowledge, and unlearn their own privilege" and to "...[deconstruct] the centres of colonial power and [undo] the master narratives of racism" (1997:236, emphasis mine). An insurgent multiculturalism brings into question not only the effects of racism in terms of the nihilism that permeates black communities and of poverty, unemployment, racist policing and so on, but the origins of racism in the historical, political, social and cultural dynamics of white supremacy. This proved to be invaluable in my engagement and reflection with the students.

Giroux (1997) contends that Gramsci's thesis regarding *ideological hegemony*, as a form of control that manipulated consciousness and shaped daily experiences and behaviour, is crucial to our understanding of how *cultural hegemony* is used to reproduce economic and political power. Advanced industrialised countries like the United States distribute not only goods and services unequally, but varying forms of cultural capital - "...that system of meanings, abilities, language forms, and tastes that are directly and indirectly defined by dominant groups as socially legitimate" (Apple, cited in Giroux, 1997:6). Within the dominant culture, meaning becomes universalised, and historically conditioned processes and notions of social reality appear as self-evident, given and fixed. Thus, as Freire (1970, 1972, 1973) and Gramsci (1971, 1977) held, the importance of "...critical reflection lays bare the historically and socially sedimented values at work in the construction of knowledge, social relations and material practices" (Giroux, 1983:154).

Giroux contends that the modes of analysis in radical pedagogy must be underscored by two major questions: (a) how do we make education meaningful by making it critical; and (b) how do we make it critical so as to make it emancipatory (1983:3). Giroux (1983, 1997) attacks modernist, technical-positivist rationality, which elevates reason to an ontological status, arguing that it does not allow for subjectivity and critical thinking, and that it is antithetical to the development of citizenship education. He posits arguments for citizenship education to be informed by an *emancipatory rationality*, which is based on the principles of critique and action, and which reproduces and stresses the "...importance of social relationships in which men and women are treated as ends and not means" (Giroux, 1983:191).

Emancipatory citizenship education must be used to stimulate students' passions and imaginations, so that they may be encouraged to challenge the social, political and economic forces that impact upon the lives of people; to display what Giroux (1983:201) called *civic courage*. Issues regarding citizenship and democracy cannot be addressed within the restrictive language of markets, profit, individualism, competition and choice, which create indifference to inequality, hunger, deprivation, exploitation and suffering. Educators must have moral courage and power of criticism, and must not, in the name of objectivity, distance themselves from power relations that exclude, oppress, subjugate, exploit and diminish other human beings. We need to create opportunities for the development of critical consciousness and, where possible, for transformative action. International exchanges provide one such route to broadening horizons and developing

critical consciousness in the manner envisaged by Freire, Gramsci and Giroux. In striving to achieve these objectives we need to begin where the students are, within their historical and socio-cultural spaces.

### **STUDENT EXPECTATIONS AND IDENTITY CONFRONTATION: CHALLENGES TO THE HOST INSTITUTION**

While South Africa's first world features constitute a pull factor, it is South Africa's characteristics of the Two-Thirds World<sup>2</sup> that tend to really attract social work students. International students arrive with their own agendas and prior lived experiences. But as Guevara and Ylvisaker (2003:84) have pointed out:

*“There is no way to fully prepare United States university students for a gut-wrenching confrontation with the levels of poverty in which many of the world's people live their daily lives – or the health and social consequences of this poverty.”*

It is up to the host institution to remain acutely sensitive to students' needs and experiences, and to have skilled and sensitive staff to deal with them. African-American students arrive in South Africa with romanticised notions of returning to the motherland to find their roots, often characterised by a euphoric: *“I got up this morning and I still can't believe that I am in Africa”*, or *“It's hard to believe I am home”*. However, this sense of elation is often accompanied by intense mixed emotions, including sadness and anger linked to the African Diaspora and South Africa's recent apartheid past. Almost immediately students are confronted with the reality that they are more American than African, a realisation which I found often having its genesis in the offence of being mistaken for a local South African and being greeted in the traditional *isiZulu*. The dialect of culture, historical and self-identities, and national identities is indeed complicated. When confronted with the realities, it would appear that national identities gain primacy.

This reaction does bring into question contested notions of global citizenship (a concept that I believe to be rooted in conquest, colonialism and slavery) and Midgley's (2000:15) assertion that, *“In the future, many people will regard nationality as of secondary importance to global citizenship”*. While arriving with a strong identification with Africa, and with slavery and the slave trade in the African Diaspora, African-American students more often than not felt insulted about being seen as local Africans. This may be linked to the fact that race and identity are embedded in the politics of social, economic and class divisions (Giroux, 1994). It is perhaps the signifier of socio-economic class (African-American students do not share the same socio-economic class as local Africans, the majority of whom are poor), apart from the national identification that influenced the students' reactions. This does indeed reflect the impact of context on identities and points to the notion of shifting identities.

Many international students arrive with a naïve notion of wanting to “really make a difference”. Such altruistic ideals are often immediately challenged by students' exposure to the extent of South Africa's deprivation, poverty and homelessness, and the highly visible children of the streets. The battle with their own emotional reactions and their compassion is often accompanied by a sense of disbelief that such circumstances could have been allowed to have developed,

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<sup>2</sup> In the global standards document for social work education and training (Sewpaul & Jones, 2005:230) make the following point: *“Given the limitations of dichotomies, and the linear modernist implications of the use of the words ‘underdeveloped’, ‘developing’ or ‘developed’, there is preference for the use of the concept ‘Two-Thirds World’.* The concept reflects, numerically, the majority of the world's population that lives in poverty and deprivation, and it does not imply any evaluative criteria with regard to superiority/inferiority”.

coupled at times with a more direct question: “*What are you doing about it?*” Mentoring and debriefing students play a vital role in allowing them to make a realistic appraisal of their potential contribution, and helping them to gain perspective and a cognitive grasp of the situation - strategies that have their roots in crisis intervention. This is by design, as students who confront the realities of South Africa often experience crisis reactions.

Most students experience very intense emotional reactions to situations of extreme poverty and to conditions in informal settlements, but they tend to stay with the feelings and work through their experiences during debriefing sessions, often amid a host of tears and expressions of confusion. The debriefing sessions focus on validating students’ feelings, reflecting on their practice, dealing with South Africa’s recent emergence from apartheid, examining the role of the international community in South Africa’s history and present status, and critically appraising South Africa’s attempts to deal with its current realities. The latter is dealt with from both from a national and global perspective.

### **STUDENT FIELD PLACEMENTS: ACTION AND REFLECTION**

Prior to the arrival of the students, the coordinator at the host institution is informed about the students’ areas of interest, and as far as possible field placements are organised accordingly. Students are placed primarily in generic non-governmental welfare organisations rather than specialist agencies, as the generic organisations provide for broad-based exposure to a host of pertinent issues such as adoption, foster care, children of the street, HIV/AIDS, residential care, youth at risk, social work in informal settlements and substance abuse.

Two issues are highlighted to reflect the kinds of content that the debriefing and mentoring sessions focus upon. Given the interactive and circular relationship amongst the questions and concerns, and the systemic relationship between the micro and the macro factors, it is difficult to separate issues. Following the radical pedagogy of Freire (1970, 1972, 1973), Gramsci (1971, 1977) and Giroux (1983, 1997), action and critical reflection became crucial components of the educational process. All the discussions and debates were held in relation to the students’ observations, experiences and work in the field placement context both on-site and in the classroom.

### **SERVICES TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

In view of the massive problems of youth in trouble with the law, street children, child abuse and the high rates of HIV infection among children and the youth, much of the discussion revolved around questions such as: What are we offering our children and youth? How does the system fail them? The impact of poverty and the structural sources of youth alienation and crime were emphasised, as was the phenomenon of the demonisation of the youth, particularly black youths by an adult population (Williams, 1988; Giroux, 1994, 1997). Under extensive societal pressures, these groups appear to have moved toward a state of moral relativism as described in other parts of the world (Williams, 2002). The students’ field experiences highlighted the dimensions of “race”, gender and class, with “race” and poverty having the highest visibility for them. The relationship between race and poverty is discussed in the section on HIV/AIDS in South Africa. On a positive note, the shift in emphasis to restorative rather than retributive justice in working with children and youths in trouble with the law, and the move toward family preservation and family reunification, as per the policy recommendations of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Youth at Risk (1996), were discussed and debated.



## HIV/AIDS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Discussions on HIV/AIDS highlighted, as did many other issues, the systemic relationship between the individual and the family, and broader structural issues, including global ones. Reviewing global patterns of HIV infection drew the possible relationship between poverty, lack of social cohesion and inequality, on the one hand, and HIV/AIDS, on the other. South Africa, characterised by the features outlined below, has the highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS (over 5 million people) in the world:

- Enormous lack of social cohesion (a legacy of apartheid laws that deliberately destroyed families);
- Mistrust of condom use amongst the majority of people as they link it with the subtle but concerted effort in the 1970s to reduce the black population (Smart, Dennill & Pleaner, 2001);
- One of the most skewed income distribution profiles in the world, with an individual-based Gini Coefficient of 0.73 (Statistics South Africa, 2002). Almost all of the poor are Africans who live in either rural areas or urban slums/informal settlements (Department of Welfare and Population Development, 1998). The poverty of African people is highly visible in South Africa, despite a very rapidly emerging black middle class.

The Jaipur paradigm (Barnett & Whiteside, cited in Smart et al., 2001) uses studies to show that the rate of HIV transmission is determined by two key variables: the degree of social cohesion and the overall levels of wealth. Thus, a country like South Africa, with low levels of social cohesion and high income inequality, sees a rapid growth of the epidemic.

The relationship between socio-economic, cultural and political factors was also analysed by reviewing provincial rates. KwaZulu-Natal, as one of four provinces with high rates of HIV3, has relatively little land space, but is the most densely populated and home to 20,7% of South Africa's population of over 40 million people. It is also one of the poorest provinces, with high unemployment (39,1%) and low literacy levels (22% compared with a national average of 19,3%). It is also the province that suffered the effects of major violence between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress prior to the elections in 1994. This violence contributed to a massive displacement of people and the mushrooming of informal settlements. In addition, it is a province with two ports and a very well-developed road transportation system along the main freeways that lead to neighbouring African states.

These features, combined with substantial rural features, lay the infrastructure for the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. Cultural practices such as polygamy, dry sex and the role of patriarchy as co-factors in the aetiology of HIV/AIDS have also been the focus of our attention, as have the myths that sleeping with a virgin or traditional medicines could cure HIV/AIDS. What future for South Africa, with an estimated 70,000 children born HIV positive every year and the fastest rate of infection, via sexual contact, being in the age group 15-29 years? We also discussed the implications of the high rates of infection and death among the most productive members of our society for various sectors of South Africa. The phenomena of child-headed households, the increased vulnerability of women and children, children orphaned on account of HIV/AIDS and

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Nelson Mandela/Human Sciences Research Council Study on HIV/AIDS (2002) the Free State, Gauteng and Mpumalanga had the highest prevalence rates (over 14%). KwaZulu-Natal, which was previously thought to have the highest rate, ranked fourth, with an 11,7% infection rate.

the responses of the South African government, the NGO sector and of the international community were discussed at length. We also considered the failures of the South African government in respect of not making treatment accessible to HIV-positive persons, especially the low-cost nevirapine for prevention of mother-to-child transmission, and the impact of the dissident views of President Thabo Mbeki on HIV and AIDS, both nationally and internationally. Of all South Africa's recent high-cost (both material and human) blunders, the enigma of anti-retroviral therapy must be the worst (Sewpaul, 2002).

The macro-economic policy shifts from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) document that reflected ideals of democratic socialism to the adoption of GEAR in June 1996, with its neo-liberal principles, were discussed in relation to economic globalisation and its implications for the people of South Africa. This took the discussion to the political thesis of Franz Fanon (1970), who warned about the emergence of the new national elite in post-colonial states (as occurred in post-apartheid South Africa as well), which used the new state for capital accumulation and personal gain. We reviewed the contradictions, tensions and resistance that are evident in the confluence of various competing policy paradigms in South Africa. While policy documents contain rhetoric reflecting politically correct values of justice, equality and people-centred development, it is modernism's managerial and market-related discourses that have become dominant in the practical sphere of life. The capitalist macro-economic strategy adopted by the government does not augur well for a country with the highest rate of inequality in the world. Recent trends indicate that the Gini coefficient within black communities is almost as high as the national norm. This is on account of the very rapidly emerging black middle class, a condition which has not altered the quality of life for the masses of people. Fanon (1970) cogently elucidated the dynamics of such phenomena in respect of deepening discontent. As wealth and material goods are no longer seen to belong to the *other* - the colonial whites - they are seen to be more accessible, yet unattainable. When members of one's own reference group succeed, one's own deprivation becomes more pronounced. Thus, it is not poverty per se, but poverty linked to inequality that constitutes a greater source of discontent. In the face of such poverty and inequality, it is unfortunate, and perhaps to South Africa's peril, that the government has reneged on its earlier promise of democratic socialism.

Despite some major shifts in social policy and social work practice in South Africa, the dominant influence of logical-positivist rationality and professionalism, our over-reliance on Western directives (for example, the move toward managerialism and the competencies-based approach to social work education and practice), and our willingness to adopt a demeaning dependence on the West, all pose threats to our ability to develop critical discourses and to shift the boundaries of our knowledge. They also challenge our sense of agency and our subject locations within our historical, cultural, economic and global contexts. Our agency and subject positions are also challenged by the contested spaces for control, struggle and recognition in South Africa. While sites of contestation and struggle were clear in the past, this is no longer so. Trade unions and various groups of civil society, which effectively align themselves with the new democratic order, also find themselves in a *war of position* (Gramsci, 1971) with the South African government in respect of issues such as globalisation, neo-liberal economics, privatisation and access to water, electricity and to health and welfare services. In this respect South Africa does, indeed, have a lesson for the rest of the world – a meaningful democracy is an on-going process of struggle for human rights, justice, freedom and human dignity. We have arrived at a relatively peaceful democracy from one of the most oppressive and degrading pasts. We need to remember that, if democracy is to remain meaningful and if we wish to place *humanity* at the centre of democracy in a globalising world, where the market and profit rather than human need and human struggles take

precedence, then we need to be prepared to engage in wars of position both within and across national boundaries.

The discussions on HIV/AIDS brought into sharp focus the global-national-local discourses, especially with regard to the status of post-colonial states, economic globalisation and the role of the multinational drug companies with regard to patent laws and lack of accessibility to life-saving treatment for people in the Two-Thirds World. We also critiqued the roles of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank along with the ethics of structural adjustment policies and the ethics of the power of the G8 countries in determining the economic policies of the Two-Thirds World. America's role in the subversion of alternative forms of political and economic governance in different parts of world, which has been well documented (Sunshine, 1996), was also discussed. The United States ideal of capitalist democracy is seen as the only form of acceptable political governance and any deviation from this has been attacked with sanctions, military invasions, open warfare and violence, the threat of withdrawal of aid or actual withdrawal of aid.

The politicisation of social work, the critical reflection on social work practice and the links between the personal and political aspects of people's lives provided for quite exacting confrontations with self, which were often uncomfortable and anxiety provoking.

## REFLECTION AND INTEGRATION

I found one of the most poignant comments from a student to be the observation that South African social workers were involved in *survival struggles* and in the *total life world of "clients"* compared to their American counterparts.<sup>4</sup> The immediacy of the impact of poverty and structural sources of inequality means that it is almost impossible to ignore the total gestalt of the persons with whom we are working. Family and community outreach and education, material aid, negotiating access to care and treatment, capacity building, skills development and income generation are as much an integral part of service delivery as are direct counselling and rehabilitation. The comment on American social work practice by Pozutto (2001:157-158) is worth repeating:

*"... [For] the most part, US social workers envision the social order as a given, largely unchangeable entity.... Much of the American social work profession has accepted the 'knowledge' that legitimates the American social order. The drive to professionalism was...an early step in that direction.... [The] function of much of contemporary social work is to 'normalize' the population.... [Social] work is a form of social control contributing to the legitimisation of the current social order."*

The idea is not to provide a simplistic comparison of America and South Africa. On a global level social work has been criticised for its failure to work towards change that is directed at the structural inequalities which keep people in poverty and dispossessed positions (Dominelli, 1996a; Dominelli, 1996b; Sewpaul, 1992) and for the entrenchment of control functions inherent in traditional personal-deficiency approaches to welfare. There have been major policy and practice shifts in South Africa, including some very innovative, cost-effective interventions developed by social work practitioners (Sewpaul, 2001) that need to be acknowledged and validated. While social workers are adept at implementing policy and appear to understand the impact of structural

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<sup>4</sup> The placement choices for students might reflect a bias in that the more progressive organisations that generally reflect the policy shifts in welfare post-1994 were selected.

forces on the lives of people, the challenge is for a greater number of South African social workers to recognise and fulfil their policy-making, advocacy and social-change roles. In drawing a direct comparison with the United States, Pozzuto (2001:158) goes on to say:

*“South Africans know better than this. The transition of the South African government and the current recreation of the civil society show that the social order is not fixed, nor permanent, nor immutable. This is a lesson, a gift, South Africa can provide to the US. South Africans also know that there are competing ways to conceptualise the social world.”*

The situation is not as positive or as straightforward as Pozzuto claims. There are marked tensions and contradictions within South African society that present major challenges both for the social work profession and for South African society.

Some of the students' fieldwork experiences offered them an alternative view of professionalism to that of the dominant logical-positivist conception that they had been exposed to. Logical-positivism, reflecting modernism's technical rationality, favours a linear reductionist approach to assessment and management, sees the practitioner as the "expert" who prescribes solutions, adopts the "proof-is-truth" axiom as defined by logical-positivist empiricism, and calls for the practitioner to be uninvolved, detached, value-free and neutral (Sewpaul, 1997, 2001). Such a view of professionalism is incompatible with anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 1996b). There is a need to mainstream alternative conceptions of professionalism and for a redefinition of professionalism from a feminist perspective (Dominelli, 2002). An emphatic tuning into the life worlds and suffering of people, especially in circumstances of extreme deprivation, poverty and inequality, means that we cannot remain value-free and neutral. We cannot help but make sense of the lives of people in relation to the structures that surround them and engage the positive forces of people as we come to terms with our own limitations as professionals and as we confront the major challenges involved in the change process.

Acquiring these insights can form an important part of the international exchange experience. One group of students had the opportunity of being educated by a group of HIV-positive women whom I had worked with. A colleague from Minnesota, who spent some time in Social Work, University of Natal, trained two of the women in English language skills. These women then did a full session with the rest of the group, with the students as participants as well. While the focus was on language acquisition, the messages were about what it means to be living with HIV/AIDS and a brief, simple lesson on South African politics. On the same day the students had the opportunity to see the women, who had extensive training in HIV/AIDS counselling, education and outreach, in action as they engaged in an HIV/AIDS education programme in a hospital context. The power and credibility of the HIV-positive women as peer educators were obvious and the impact much greater than I could have hoped to make as a professional.

One student cried bitterly during a debriefing session, on account of the emotional trauma as she daily encountered children and adults with symptomatic HIV and children dying from AIDS. (Although naught for the students' comfort, such events did serve to highlight the extremely profound and direct implications of macro-economic and health policies). Linked to this was her major concern about how people back home could possibly understand what she had experienced. While I acknowledged her feelings and concerns, I pointed out that the power for her lay in the lived experience, and that it

would be difficult for someone on the outside to fully understand such an experience. In discussing what they could do to make a difference, I often affirmed that they were making a difference simply by their willingness to engage with people on the level that they did. Their affirmation, acceptance and validation of the people with whom they came into contact were gifts, as might be a change in perspective that they might offer. However, the major challenge was recognising their personal and national privileged spaces (which many talked about and acknowledged), working towards de-stigmatising the people of Africa and raising awareness about global politics and economics. One student, on returning to the US, wrote frequently to indicate what a life-altering experience the exchange programme was and that he had sustained his interest in the area of HIV/AIDS. After attending a local conference, he said: "I learned so many different ways that I could help Africa here in my own state, even in my own town. I am going to be telephoning, writing and lobbying my local representatives and urge them to STOP GLOBAL AIDS" (e-mail correspondence 01/10/03).

Freire (1972, 1973) Gramsci (1971, 1977) and Giroux (1983, 1997) believed that the development of critical consciousness might lead to critical action. Freire's idea of praxis or conscious action involves a dialectical movement from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to a new action (Freire, 1972). Giroux (1983) points out that subjective intentions alone pose little threat to the existing socio-political order. However, social action must be preceded by an awareness that makes the need for such action comprehensible. Awareness represents an important step in getting students to act as engaged and responsible citizens who question the structural basis of social life. One student expressed a great deal of confusion as he cried and said:

*"I grew up in America and I was led to believe that we were of value to the world by virtue of being the United States. We were always made to feel so proud to be American. I have come half way across the world to learn about our economic policy and how it might be affecting people in different parts of the world."*

Students, like all other people, are constructed within particular cultural, social, political and historical relations. Thus, they had difficulty in integrating information and experiences that confronted both self and national identities and loyalties. However, the value of education needs to be questioned if it is not used to challenge dominant paradigms and ideologies. Such confrontation, I believe, is central to shifting the boundaries of knowledge, to one's personal and professional development and to one's commitment to social change. Radical pedagogy confirms that it is the self that must be the main site of politicisation. It provides scope for students to:

*"...extend their understandings of themselves and the global contexts in which they live... [and it] affirms the importance of offering students a language that allows them to reconstruct their moral and political energies in the service of creating a more just and equitable order, one that undermines relations of hierarchy and domination." (Giroux, 1997:225)*

## CONCLUSION

International exchanges broaden horizons through the challenges provided by field placements, new opportunities for discussion, debate and critical reflection, and the destabilising experiences that the students undergo. These challenges question their taken-for-granted assumptions about themselves and the world, and require that they in

turn challenge the boundaries of their knowledge. My own biography and the influence of the emancipatory pedagogy of Freire (1970, 1972, 1973), Gramsci (1988, 1971, 1977) and Giroux (1983, 1994, 1997) were powerful factors that influenced my work with the students, and in offering alternative conceptions of professionalism and social work practice. The emphases on global and local discourses around “race”, gender, poverty and HIV/AIDS served to heighten awareness of local struggles, the strengths and limitations of national policies and responses, the impact of American foreign policies and of international financial institutions and transnational companies on South Africa’s development opportunities.

While the experience seemed to be overwhelmingly positive, several concerns arise both in relation to local and international students. How does one sustain students’ interests and passions, especially where such teaching/learning strategies are not replicated in other contexts? How do we encourage/foster transfer of learning across cognate disciplines and from one situation to the next? How do we balance students’ need for certainty and directives against the general flexibility and the acknowledgement of shifting signifiers in emancipatory education? Do we understand what drives students’ need for such certainty and directives? How do students’ conceptual abilities and their relative positions of disadvantage impact on such need? Given the time-consuming and labour-intensive nature of emancipatory teaching/learning, how do we get educators to support and institutionalise it? How can the culture of teaching/learning and forms of assessment at institutions of higher learning, which seem to be informed by a technical, logical-positivist and market-driven rationality, be transformed to support emancipatory strategies?

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